2001 Monitoring Trip Findings Summary

Snowbowl Ski Expansion, and Forest NEPA process

Missoula Ranger District

September 18, 2001

The Northside timber sale is located on the northern outskirts of Missoula in the Grant Creek and Butler Creek drainages. The objectives of this sale were to improve winter range and elk forage; encourage ponderosa pine growth; and to reduce fuels within stands thereby helping to reduce the risk of catastrophic fires. To meet these objectives, timber harvest along with prescribed low intensity fires were used. Throughout the planning period, meetings with the public emphasized the importance of returning fire to the ecosystem and the potential impacts of smoke on the valley.

The monitoring group visited several sites within the Northside project area. Initially we stopped along the road where private logging had occurred using low impact equipment (feller buncher) during the winter months. A Missoula District Sale Administrator and the Forest Hydrologist monitored the soil disturbance on this site and found that it did not meet Region One Forest Service soil quality standards, FSH 2500, R1 supplement 2500-99-1. They remembered that in February the snow was wet and not frozen. This fact and the presence of steep slopes probably caused the soil compaction they saw and the displacement of soil up to one foot in places.

The group visited Unit 24 of the Northside sale. This stand does not constitute an old growth stand but the prescription allowed for management of a future old growth stand. The prescription favored species at risk, larch and ponderosa pine, using improvement and group selection cuts. The objective was to reduce fuel ladders and down woody fuels, and to reduce the risk of insect and root disease. This type of cut fits with the National Fire Plan goals.

One topic discussed concerning this unit was the coarse woody debris requirement for this stand. The stand does not currently have the 5-12 tons/acre that is prescribed for this habitat type. Yet, the stand can meet this standard in the future because of the standing fuels. The discussion point was when does this woody debris guideline need to be met.

Overall, the project was successful in reducing the fire hazards in an urban interface situation. Forest resource specialists concurred that their resource areas had been fully protected and/or considered. Since the Decision Notice was signed in 1993, bull trout was listed as a Threatened species. The project area was modified and Inland Native Fish Strategy (INFISH) buffers were in place prior to harvesting. Several viewpoints were chosen from the valley floor to guide the placement of proposed activities. In the end, the visual quality objective of partial retention was exceeded and met retention standards since the average person cannot see that these activities have occurred.

Questions and concerns that arose focused on looking at balancing the effects of what we are really achieving with reduction fuel hazard projects with the costs of the operation, the number of entries required to meet objectives, and the increase in weed risk to an area following project

implementation.

Next, the Missoula District Ranger shared the latest update of the Snowbowl ski expansion with the group. Snowbowl would like to expand their ski area to twice the size of its existing area. The ski area would expand to TV Mountain. Prior to expansion, the existing road into the ski area would need to be improved and additional parking areas would need to be added. The existing road into the ski area poses a hazard to drivers and many cars often go off the road. Snowbowl has hired a fisheries biologist to assess impacts from modifications to the road along with the existing ski area to the fisheries resource. Lolo National Forest fisheries biologists will need to review this biological assessment when it becomes available.

Finally, the group discussed the Forest NEPA/NFMA process over lunch. The Forest has current direction available in the 1995 "peach booklet" titled, The Process of Integrating Ecosystem Management and NEPA. This pamphlet is outdated and the Plains/Thompson Falls District Ranger and the Forest Implementation Program Officer will take Forest employee comments concerning ways to improve this booklet. These comments will be used by the Forest Leadership Team to update the booklet.

Some comments concerning the NEPA process were: a need for more District Ranger involvement in projects, a project's purpose and need can start out rather generic but be later defined after the public scoping process, a clearly defined purpose and need will help streamline the process, there is a need to look at new work processes, define what interdisciplinary really means, what are the responsibilities of interdisciplinary team members, provide writing skills training for those who need it, and attempt to plan projects in the winter months not during the field season.

West Fork Thompson Slide, Canyon Face Timber Sale and Powderhouse Flats

Plains/Thompson Falls Ranger District

September 20, 2001

The monitoring group looked at management activities within the West Fork Thompson ecosystem management area (EMA). Key issues and proposed management strategies for this EMA centered around access management, recreational opportunities, grizzly bear recovery, roadless lands, watershed stability, forest/ecosystem health, mineral extraction potential, and fisheries decline.

The first stop of the day was to monitor an active slide area and discussed long-term options to fully stabilize this site. We stopped along the West Fork of Thompson Creek Road where a section of hillside and road has been sliding into the West Fork of Thompson Creek. The road was built in the 1930s. After a flood came through the area in 1964, a portion of the area slid into the creek. A retaining wall was put in as an emergency measure. Late in 1999, approximately 5,000 cubic yards of material broke off from the top of the cut slope and was perched above the road and the West Fork of Thompson River. A small quantity of material reached the river, but the vast majority was poised and ready to slide. In 2000, the Lolo National Forest performed an emergency project to remove the perched island of material and flatten the cutslope where possible to help stabilize the area and prevent damage to the fishery. Future plans include additional stabilization measures including extending the retaining wall in the upstream direction to prevent future sliding. The West Fork of Thompson is an important bull trout stream and the area needs to be stabilized. This is being addressed in the Forest project, West Fork Thompson

Stream Restoration, which attempts to identify habitat restoration as partial mitigation to the slide area.

Further up the road, the group stopped to look at a seep area that was fixed with culverts and filter cloth. Prior to repair, water was running down the road from the seep. Below the seep, a culvert at Honeymoon Creek was identified as a fish barrier since it has a two-foot drop. This project predated INFISH Standards. The Forest Fisheries Biologist suggested getting this culvert fixed in the near future. The project has been incorporated into the Lolo National Forest watershed, wildlife, fish, and rare plants database. As it attains priority, it will be scheduled.

The group stopped and looked at Units 1 and 10 of the Canyon Face Timber Sale. Unit 1 was helicopter logged. Like the other units in this timber sale, this unit was harvested for the benefit of wildlife resources. The casual observer would not notice that logging had occurred. And yet, 350 to 400 loads of timber were flown into a helicopter landing. The older, bigger trees were left in the unit. Overall in the project area, the open road density was reduced from 1.2 miles/mile^2 to 0.9 miles/mile^2. Cover habitat was reduced from 93 percent to 89 percent and all standards for maintenance of cover for grizzly bears were achieved thorough creation of small openings only (less than 40 acres) and maintaining high interspersion. Prescribed burning will enhance over 1,000 acres of forage for elk and grizzly bear.

The noxious weed, spotted knapweed, is present throughout the project area. Most of the knapweed is confined to the roads. Even though the roads were treated with herbicide to reduce the spread of spotted knapweed, the roads are still full of knapweed. Therefore, the project area will need additional herbicide treatments for spotted knapweed. Treatments should be planned prior to spring or late fall underburns planned for the project area. Additional discussion included the need for a Forest-wide ground-based weed treatment environmental assessment.

Unit 10 was logged in the 1960s and resulted in a mix of vegetative cover and size classes. The current prescription for Unit 10 was to leave 10-20 trees/acre with irregular spacing and groups of trees with a preference to leave large Douglas-fir and larch trees. This prescription optimized the timber-growing potential in the more mesic grand fir habitat types, which is typical in the project area. The prescription had been met and all resource specialists agreed implementation was successful in meeting their resource concerns.

The last stop was in a forested stand along the Thompson River Road, called Powderhouse Flats. The decision for Powderhouse Flats timber sale was included in the Canyon Face Environmental Assessment. The success of this project was due to team dynamics, efficiency, and project ownership of team members in the end product. The Forest needs to model this team behavior into future endeavors. The management objective of this stand was to reduce the basal area, reduce fuels, and improve big game winter range. The District shared information that they had collected following post-treatment activities. The mix of trees present is 51 percent ponderosa pine, 45 percent western larch, and 4 percent Douglas-fir. Presently, the stand does not meet the coarse woody debris standards for downed wood. Woody plant cover decreased about 5 percent, herbaceous cover increased about 30 percent, and the number of plant species seen increased a percent or two. The long-term objective is to have an open park-like stand favoring ponderosa pine and larch trees.

The group discussed the management of old growth stands and recognized that not all comparable stands should be managed to look like open parks. The Forest Fisheries Biologist stated there is a lack of large woody debris in Thompson River and any opportunities to get some in the river should be pursued.

Deer Creek Phase One Road Decommissioning

Ninemile Ranger District

September 21, 2001

The Deer Creek EMA is about 2500 acres and is mostly in management area (MA) 16, which are lands suitable for timber management. The area was heavily logged in the later half of the 1970s, but the area is now regenerated. A locked gate currently closes the road system in the project area.

During the 1990s, there was a push to decommission roads in heavily roaded areas on the Forest. Since Deer Creek is one of the areas on the Forest that has high road densities and problems with road sloughing have been noticed, and there are no plans to re-enter stands, this road-decommissioning project was proposed in the annual EMA review meeting. Deer Creek is within the Fish Creek drainage, which is a priority bull trout and water quality limited stream.

Objectives of this road-decommissioning project were to: reduce road density and surface water flows on roads and minimize the sediment that may enter adjacent streams, improve long-term water quality, reduce the threat of culvert failure, road maintenance costs and noxious weed infestation.

The monitoring group looked at Phase One of the project. This work involved pulling 50 culverts and recontouring the roadbed back to the natural slope. Where roads were recontoured, slash from on-site was placed over the disturbed areas. Trees were laid vertical to the slope and the Lolo National Forest seed mix (minus the yellow sweet clover) was used in seeding. Tordon will be sprayed in the Phase One project area when project work is completed. This will consist of spraying seven miles of main road. Phase Two of the project will involve doing similar work in an adjacent project area and involves decommissioning 24 miles of road, including the main road, and pulling 64 culverts.

The group agreed that the completed work looked successful in meeting its objectives. Given the limited dollars in the Forest budget, the question arose whether we should focus on just pulling culverts or periodically doing less work by building overflow channels when there is no concern for sediment, or include the full recontouring work. This discussion lead to whether the Forest should be spending limited funds in lower priority areas. The group felt this was not a high-risk area to fish and watershed concerning sediment problems. In summary, the Forest has a process for evaluating road decommissioning projects with a team of appropriate interdisciplinary specialists to prioritize the highest needs. However, due to limited funds and other Forest priorities, there has been a problem of completing NEPA for many of the Forest's higher priority areas.